

The situation of the Polish LGBT movement

Marzena Lizurej

It is only since 1990 that we can really talk about the LGBT movement in Poland, when the first official gay and lesbian rights organization 'Lambda' was registered. It has to be noted, though, that there were earlier attempts to organize on behalf of homosexual persons. The so called gay and lesbian culture appeared in Poland (together with the women's movement) alongside the democratizing processes in the Eastern block. The appearance of that culture was accompanied (not always in a very smooth manner) by a host of new political and sociological ideas. Overall, we, as activists and academics, encountered these ideas as one big package, with little historical awareness. This meant a number of problems when it comes to working out a strategy for sexual minorities that would be sensitive to the particular socio-political conditions in Poland.

Apart from Lambda, the biggest formal sexual minorities organizations in Poland are: Campaign Against Homophobia (established in 2001); International Lesbian and Gay Culture Network ILGCN-Poland (since 2000), Culture for Tolerance

Foundation (2005), Equality Foundation (2005). They are supported by organizations working towards tolerance, such as Amnesty International (since 1989) or Freedom Foundation (2004) as well as feminist organizations. Various LGBT groups in Poland, both formal and informal concentrated mostly on creating a common gay identity and to a lesser extent, a lesbian identity. Their efforts concentrated on encouraging homosexual persons to come out and become engaged in activism. Accordingly, these groups also focused on gay and lesbian visibility.

A number of initiatives contributed to the creation of gay identity, such as the *Inaczej* [Differently] magazine (1990-2002), later *Interhom*, and from 2005 *Replika*. In terms of lesbian initiatives, one needs to mention *Furia Pierwsza* [Fury One], issued between 1997-2000 by OLA-Archiwum (Polish Lesbian Archives). A number of gay and lesbian websites (such as InnaStrona.pl, Gejowo.pl, Kobiety-Kobietom.com or Lesbijka.net) created as the popularity of the Internet increased, took on the role of integrating the LGBT community. One of the most spectacular activist events was the social advertising campaign "Let them see us," organized by Campaign Against Homophobia in 2003. As part of the campaign, thirty photographs of gay and lesbian couples holding hands were shown in art galleries and on billboards. Even though the exhibition was rather toned down, nevertheless, it caused a scandal. At the

same time, it helped to strengthen the visibility of gays and lesbians.

From 2001 on, public marches have become the main political tool of the LGBT movement. Events such as the Equality Pride in Warsaw, March of Tolerance in Krakow and March of Equality in Poznan are organized on a regular basis. In 2005, the March of Equality was banned by the city authorities and the participants of the illegal demonstration were brutally treated by the police. This event was followed by a number of rallies in support of the march, called "The Equality March goes on."

An important issue for the LGBT movement in Poland is regulating the legal situation of persons in same-sex relationships. The project of a legal bill introducing same-sex civil partnerships was brought up in the parliament twice, in 2002 and 2003; however, both projects were rejected straight away.

Few political parties in Poland are openly declaring a positive attitude towards sexual minorities and a willingness to represent their interests. Among these parties are the following: The Democratic Party, the Greens 2004, however, they have very little social support. Only a handful of politicians are publicly out. These are for instance Robert Biedron (co-founder of Campaign Against Homophobia, activist of the Alliance of the Democratic Left);

Marzena Chincz (creator of the Lesbijka.org, activist of the Democratic Party) or Krystian Legierski (Lambda activist, member of Greens 2004).

In terms of providing a cultural and theoretical grounding for the sexual minorities movement, it is necessary to mention the activity of individual scholars, engaged in promoting ideas of human rights, gay and lesbian studies and queer theory. The activities of student organizations have also played a significant part. An example would be the Academic Queer Studies Association "Nothing the Same Way", established in Wroclaw University. It is primarily universities that have become the space for channelling these ideas, even though quite often university authorities are sceptical towards this sort of academic activity. Contemporary theories of gender and sexuality, as well as relevant academic research are presented in the form of lectures, publications (including books) and conferences. The most noticeable is the group of queer theory scholars connected with the Internet-based academic journal *InterAlia*.

Its leaders - Tomek Basiuk, Dominika Ferens and Tomek Sikora organized a series of annual conferences devoted to queer theory between 2000 and 2006. LGBT culture is promoted by numerous festivals, for instance the Culture for Tolerance festival in Krakow,

the Queer Film Festival A million different loves!? in Lodz, Festival against exclusions Gays, Lesbians and Friends in Wroclaw, Queer Fest in Torun, or the Festival of Rainbow Families in Warsaw.

The LGBT community had high hopes connected with Poland's accession into the European Union on May 1, 2004. The activists hoped that the anti-discrimination bill would be introduced into the Polish law. They were also keen on seeing an increased social acceptance of sexual minorities. The only document in the Polish law, which forbids discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation refers to the area of labour law and was introduced during the pre-accession process. According to the Polish constitution, no one should be discriminated on any basis whatsoever. At the same time, the constitutional protection of the institution of marriage specifies that marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman. According to the research undertaken by the national statistics agency, CBOS, in 2005 social tolerance towards homosexual persons grew by 8 percentage points in comparison with the 2001 results. At the same time, this means that only 55% tolerate homosexuality, whereas only 4% agree that it is normal. In 2008, 8% declared that homosexuality is normal, and 52% claimed that they tolerate homosexuality.

The victory of the right-wing party Law and Justice in the 2005

elections turned out to be a big step back with regard to the fight for sexual minorities' rights. Law and Justice politicians created a coalition with the ultra-right wing League of Polish Families, famous for xenophobia and hostility towards European values. The party was supported mostly by conservative Catholics. Its youth organization (officially until 2006), the All-Polish Youth regularly attacked feminist and LGBT manifestations and openly called for violence towards sexual minorities. However, the All-Polish youth is not the only ultra right-wing organization active in Poland. Another quite vocal group is the National Rebirth of Poland, whose main slogan is "Stop Faggots." After the 2005 elections, the authorities stopped supporting the activities of LGBT organizations. The position of the Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Men and Women was dismantled. The existing gay and lesbian organizations were threatened with delegalization. Finally, the authorities announced the introduction of a bill which would ban persons promoting homosexuality from working as teachers.

The Catholic Church is largely responsible for the negative attitudes towards sexual minorities. In 2009, According to CBOS, 95% of Poles declared they were Catholic. The church treats homosexuality as "morally disordered", that is, a form of disability. It does not view discrimination against gays and lesbians as a sin; rather, as legitimate action to protect the common good. Church

authorities recommend sexual abstinence to persons with "those tendencies," at the same time church officials support reparative therapy. Conservative parties and groups view abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality as main threats stemming from the "civilization of death" (a term used by the Polish Pope John Paul II), represented by the EU. Furthermore, many individuals of non-normative sexuality feel torn between their sexual orientation and their religious needs.

After the 2007 parliamentary elections, won by the more liberal Citizens' Platform (the League of Polish Families did not enter the parliament), the situation of sexual minorities improved slightly. However, officially, the fight against homophobia or support for the rights of sexual minorities is not part of the governmental agenda. Even though the position of the Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Men and Women was brought back, it only serves as a facade. It is the Ombudsman who is responsible for protecting the rights of minorities.

At the moment, the LGBT movement finds itself in a state of certain stagnation. Many non-heterosexuals still are not aware of the need to fight for their rights, coming out is not really widespread (according to CBOS research in 2008, only 15% claimed they knew a gay or lesbian person), and hate speech is still widely heard in the media.

A positive outcome stemming from the cooperation between various LGBT organizations is the inclusion of transsexual activists. They are officially represented by Trans-fuzja, created in 2007. Pride parades and festivals promoting gay and lesbian culture are attracting increased numbers of participants; nevertheless, the media still treat these events as highly exotic phenomena. However, organizations working on behalf of sexual minorities do not seem to be undertaking any political actions. An unresolved issue still remains, that is, the question of a common political strategy and whether it should be based on conflict or on dialogue. Supporters of queer theory propose radical in-your-face actions, symbolized by a suggestion to organize a public disco on Good Friday. However, most LGBT activists prefer to engage in homophile-based politics, as they do not want to confront the community against the conservative forces. According to these activists, this is the best way of gaining social support for sexual minorities in Poland.

On 27 January 2008, at the National Meeting of LGBTQ Organizations, representatives of 18 organizations produced a series of demands, the most important being:

- Re-introducing the European Council "Compass" manual into the education system [the manual was withdrawn by the former minister of education, leader of the League of Polish Families]

- Introducing into schools an obligatory subject "Sexual Education"
- Making sure that school textbooks and syllabi are inclusive of the current state of knowledge on human development and identity
- Changing bills no. 256 and 257 of the Penal Code (this refers to legislation prohibiting hate crimes on the basis of race and religion) so that they include protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation
- Introducing legal regulations which would enable civil partnerships, both same-sex and opposite-sex
- Creating legal solutions for children who are brought up by homosexual couples
- Reinstating the right of transsexual persons to have the full costs of the treatment reimbursed (surgery as well as pre- and post-surgery treatment)

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